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The Trial Begins

In a cavernous Paris courtroom last week, a clerk droned endlessly through the charges against six members of the bewilderingly large cast of characters somehow involved in last fall's kidnapping—and presumed murder—of Moroccan politician Mehdi Ben Barka. Suddenly, as the clerk's recital focused on his alleged part in the crime, defendant Philippe Bernier, a left-wing French journalist, slammed his fist down on the dock railing and shouted: "But, no! It is a fantasy!"

And indeed, as presented by France's state prosecutor last week, the story of "l'affaire Ben Barka" did have fantastic overtones. The man charged with masterminding Ben Barka's disappearance was none other than the Interior Minister of Morocco, Gen. Mohammed Oufkir, 46. According to the prosecution's story, Oufkir, who hated Ben Barka's leftist politics and had sworn to see the little exile hanged, not only planned Ben Barka's kidnapping on a crowded Paris street in broad daylight but, once the abduction was accomplished, flew from Rabat to Paris to deal personally with his captured foe. (Though it is not known precisely what happened to the unlucky Ben Barka then, he has never been seen since.)

Oufkir, whom the French Government intends to try in absentia later on, was not on hand in the courtroom in Paris last week. At the weekend, Oufkir was ostentatiously playing host in his Rabat home to Morocco's King Hassan II and Hassan's current state visitor, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia. Nonetheless, the name of the darkly handsome Moroccan strong man cropped up repeatedly during the proceedings. And so did allegations that his felonious intentions toward Ben Barka were well known in advance to French authorities.

Four of the defendants in the Paris trial, in fact, were French security men of one sort or another. Two of them, who were charged with actually seizing Ben Barka and delivering him to a group of gangsters in Oufkir's pay, were detectives on the Paris narcotics squad. Another, Antoine Lopez, 42, who was charged with having fingered Ben Barka for Oufkir, was an agent of the Service de Documentation Extérieure et Contre

Espionage (SDECE)—France's version of the CIA.

Lopez, moreover, maintained that he had reported every step of the plot to his immediate boss in the SDECE, Maj. Marcel Le Roy, 46. As a result, Major Le Roy last week found himself in the dock, too—on charges that he had failed to pass Lopez's key report up the SDECE chain of command. But Le Roy said, it appeared, delivered some of Lopez's earlier reports to his superiors—and on the strength of that fact all Paris has been speculating for months as to just why no one in the French Government had acted to save Ben Barka.

Out of Bounds: Since Charles de Gaulle's government has ruled some of the most interesting questions about the Ben Barka case legally out of bounds, it seems likely that whatever skeletons Gaullist Cabinet ministers may have in their closets will remain hidden. But the case may yet bring relations between Paris and Rabat to the breaking point. General de Gaulle has publicly warned the Moroccan Government that France cannot overlook Minister Oufkir's flagrant "encroachment . . . of our sovereignty" and that relations between Paris and Rabat must "suffer the consequences." In response, General Oufkir, after ten months of no comment, succeeded just long enough to thumb his nose at de Gaulle. Oufkir dismissed the Ben Barka trial as purely "a French matter of no concern to Morocco." If the French thought they had proof of his guilt, he added smugly, they should send the documents to Rabat. "I am," said Morocco's top cop, "ready to present myself before the justice of my country and to accept its verdict."